

Parents' Reasons for Searching for Child Care and Early Education: Findings from the 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education

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Introduction

Several considerations factor into parents' search for and selection of child care and early education (CCEE) for their children. Parents may consider their income, work or schooling schedules, cultural beliefs, CCEE preferences, and local supply of CCEE. An examination of parents' CCEE search and decision-making using the 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) Household (HH) survey revealed differences in CCEE search patterns among households seeking CCEE for a child under age 6. Hill et al. (2021) noted that households with lower incomes were less likely to search for CCEE compared to households with higher incomes. A similar study examining CCEE search rates among households with lower incomes also found a lower CCEE search rate among Hispanic or Latino households compared to Black and White households (Mendez & Crosby, 2018).

Among households that conducted a search in 2012, parents with younger children often cited reasons related to meeting parents' needs, such as finding CCEE to accommodate their work or school schedule, as the main reason for their search. In contrast, parents of young children cited reasons related to supporting child's development, such as finding CCEE to provide a specific kind of help or extra-curricular activity, significantly less. In instances where the search for CCEE did not result in a change of care, households with lower incomes were more likely than households with higher incomes to attribute this to cost considerations (Hill et. al, 2021).

Glossary

Child care and early education (CCEE): refers to caregiving and educational services for children from birth to age 13. CCEE includes center- and home-based settings for infants, toddlers, preschool- and school-aged children. CCEE refers to services for a larger age group than early care and education.

CCEE Access: Parents, with *reasonable effort* and *affordability*, can enroll their child in an arrangement that *supports the child's development* and *meets the parents' needs*.

Parents searching for care for infants and toddlers: Parents reporting on their search for care for a child who was 0 to <36 months at the time of the survey.

Parents searching for care for preschool-aged children: Parents reporting on their search for care for a child who was 36 to <72 months, not yet in kindergarten, at the time of the survey.

Race and ethnicity:^a Respondent-reported race and ethnicity of the selected child, including: Non-Hispanic or Latino (NH) White; NH Black or African American; NH Asian or Asian American; NH Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; NH American Indian or Alaska Native; NH Multiracial, NH another racial category not collected; and Hispanic or Latino (any race).

^a To reduce the "otherness" that may be associated with some racial categories, this snapshot includes terms that deviate from those available in the 2019 NSECE HH survey. Specifically, we use the terms (a) "Asian or Asian American" in place of "Asian," (b) "multiracial" in place of "two or more races," and (c) "another racial category not collected" in place of "some other race."

Understanding the reasons why parents search for and make decisions about CCEE, and how those reasons may vary across households, can help inform efforts to promote equitable access to CCEE. This snapshot provides updated findings about parents' CCEE search and decision-making using the 2019 (NSECE) HH Survey.¹ We present findings on (1) the prevalence of CCEE searches among household respondents, usually parents,² that reported on children under age 6, (2) the reasons for CCEE searches, (3) the rate at which parents changed their care arrangement following a search, and (4) the reasons why parents ultimately did *not* change their care. We tested differences in CCEE search and decision-making by household income, child age, and, where sample sizes allowed, the race and ethnicity of the selected child.

To better examine CCEE decisions within the contexts of current research, we utilize a multi-dimensional definition of CCEE access offered by the Access Guidebook³ to categorize parents' reasons for looking for CCEE and reasons for not changing their care arrangement. This definition identifies equitable CCEE access as a process that requires *reasonable effort* for parents to find CCEE that is *affordable*, *supports child development*, and *meets parents' needs*.

Key Findings

Just over one-third of households that reported on a child under age 6 searched for CCEE in the two years prior to the 2019 NSECE.

- Households with higher incomes ($\geq 200\%$ FPL) searched for CCEE at a significantly higher rate than households with lower incomes ($< 200\%$ FPL).
- Households in which the child was Hispanic or Latino had lower CCEE search rates than households in which the child was NH White, NH Black or African American, or NH Asian or Asian American.
- Households in which the child was NH multiracial had higher CCEE search rates than households in which the child was NH White and NH American Indian or Alaska Native.

Meeting parents' needs and supporting child's development were the two most common reasons parents reported searching for CCEE in the two years prior to the 2019 NSECE.⁴

- Searching for CCEE to *meet parents' needs* was especially common among parents that searched for CCEE for infants and toddlers, as well as parents with lower household incomes.
- *Supporting child's development* was a more common reason among parents that searched for CCEE for a preschool-aged child, as well as parents with higher household incomes.
- Households that searched for CCEE for a NH Asian or Asian American child were more likely to cite *supporting child's development* and less likely to cite *meeting parents' needs* as their reason for search compared to households in which the child was NH White, NH Black or African American, NH multiracial, or Hispanic or Latino.

¹ A similar examination of CCEE search was featured in the 2012 NSECE snapshot, [Parents' Reasons for Searching for Early Care and Education and Results of Search](#). In both examinations, the 200% Federal Poverty Level (FPL) threshold was used to differentiate subsamples because it is a common eligibility threshold for social services; we are not suggesting that households with incomes that are at or above 200% FPL are necessarily households with high incomes. Notably, the current snapshot uses updated terminology to describe income-based subsamples compared to the 2012 NSECE publication.

² The HH Survey respondent was an adult living in the household who was "knowledgeable about the ECE usage and schedule of the youngest child in the household." Most respondents identified as a biological, adoptive, or stepparent to at least one child in the household, but a small portion of respondents were another type of guardian or a non-custodial adult in the household.

³ For more information on this access definition, refer to the full Access Guidebook ([Defining and Measuring Access to High-Quality Early Care and Education \(ECE\): A Guidebook For Policymakers And Researchers](#)) or a condensed research highlight ([Defining and Measuring Access to Child Care and Early Education with Families in Mind](#)).

⁴ No one dimension of CCEE access is a more preferred or valuable reason for engaging in a CCEE search or deciding not to enroll with a new provider. We examined comparisons to better understand which aspects of CCEE ultimately drive CCEE searches and decision making in hopes of better tailoring supports and services to meet households' needs.

More than half of households that searched for CCEE changed their care arrangement following their search.

- Households with higher incomes were more likely to change their care than those with lower incomes.

The most common reasons parents did not enroll with a new provider were related to affordability and reasonable effort.⁵

- There were no significant differences in the reasons parents did not enroll with a new provider by household income, child age, or the race and ethnicity of the selected child.

Data and Methods

To capture households' CCEE needs, preferences, and choices, the 2019 NSECE HH Survey includes information on a randomly selected child living in each household.⁶ The data in this snapshot represent the 16,372,451 households that reported on a selected child under age 6 (i.e., 0 to <72 months, not yet in kindergarten), with a special focus on the 5,950,051 households that conducted a CCEE search for that child in the 24 months prior to survey administration.⁷ We used Wald's tests to examine how the reasons for search, rates of change in CCEE, and reasons for not changing CCEE varied by household characteristics (i.e., household income, age of selected child, and race and ethnicity of the selected child) where sample sizes allowed. We did not conduct comparisons tests on samples that were suppressed or flagged for cautious interpretation. To lower the probability of falsely identifying significant differences among many comparisons, we adjusted for multiple comparisons using the Benjamini-Hochberg procedure⁸ with a false discovery rate (FDR) of 0.10.

How Many Households Searched for CCEE in the Past 24 Months?

In 2019, 37 percent of households that reported on a child under age 6 searched for CCEE in the past two years.

- There was no significant difference in rates of CCEE searches between parents that searched for care for infants and toddlers (38%) and those that searched for care for preschool-aged children (35%).
- Households with higher incomes searched for CCEE at a significantly higher rate than those with lower incomes, and this held across child age groups (see Figure 1). This trend was also observed in the 2012 NSECE analyses of CCEE search patterns (Hill et al., 2021).
- Search rates were significantly lower for Hispanic or Latino children compared to those for NH White, NH Black or African American, NH Asian or Asian American, or NH multiracial children (see Figure 2).
- Search rates were significantly higher for households searching for care for NH multiracial children compared to those searching for NH White and NH American Indian or Alaska Native children.

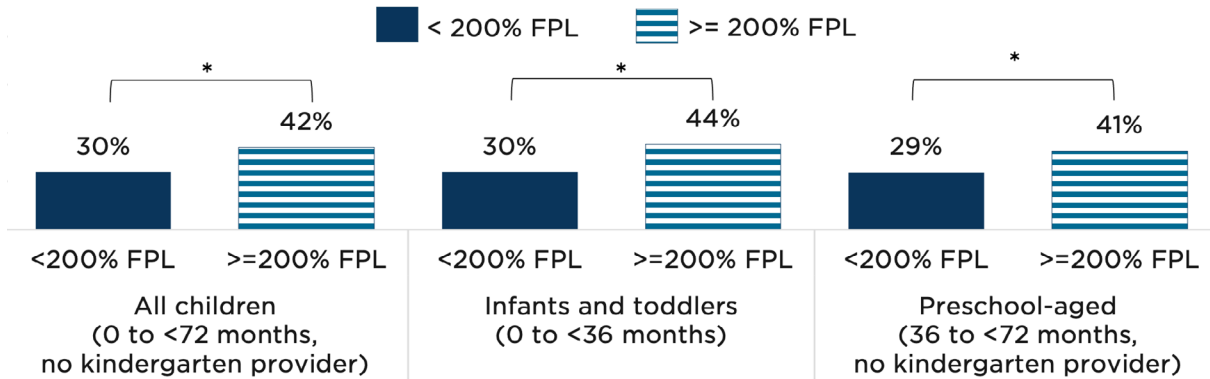
⁵ No one dimension of CCEE access is a more preferred or valuable reason for engaging in a CCEE search or deciding not to enroll with a new provider. We examined comparisons to better understand which aspects of CCEE ultimately drive CCEE searches and decision making in hopes of better tailoring supports and services to meet households' needs.

⁶ The selection rules for the focal child were different in 2012 and 2019. In 2012, the NSECE randomly selected one child among all children under age 13 living in the household, regardless of their age. In 2019, children under age 6 living in the household were selected first; a child over age 6 was selected only if there were no other children under age 6 in the household.

⁷ Given the limited household sample identified for the proposed research questions, sample sizes became increasingly small when disaggregating households by demographic characteristics. Estimates derived from an unweighted sample of less than 50 households are flagged for cautious interpretation. Estimates derived from an unweighted sample of less than 20 households were suppressed for reliability concerns, but not for privacy or identity disclosure concerns.

⁸ Benjamini, Y., & Hochberg, Y. (1995). Controlling the false discovery rate: A practical and powerful approach to multiple testing. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series B*, 57, 289-300. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2517-6161.1995.tb02031.x>

Figure 1. Percent of households that reported on CCEE search for a child under age 6, by household income and age of child

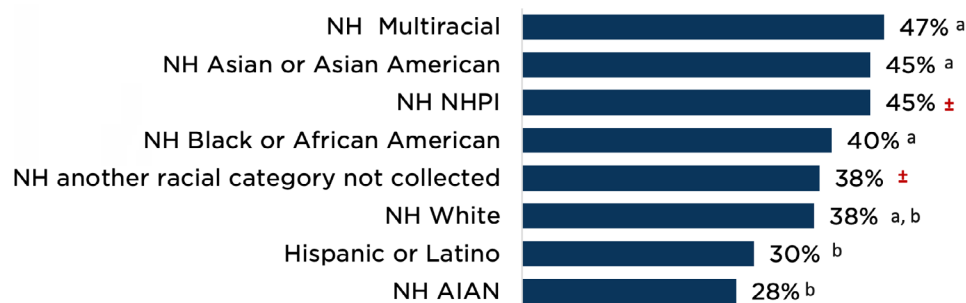


Source: Analysis of the 2019 NSECE HH Survey by Child Trends.

Note: Sample includes households that reported on children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, excluding cases in which CCEE search status was missing. FPL = federal poverty level

* Significant group differences passing a FDR correction threshold of 0.10

Figure 2. Percent of households that reported on CCEE search for a child under age 6, by race and ethnicity of the child



Source: Analysis of the 2019 NSECE HH Survey by Child Trends.

Note: Sample includes households that reported on children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, excluding cases in which either CCEE search status or child's race and ethnicity was missing.

NH = Not Hispanic or Latino; NHPI = Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; AIAN = American Indian or Alaska Native.

± = Interpret with caution due to small sample; sample not included in significance testing

^a Significantly higher CCEE search rate compared to households searching for care for Hispanic or Latino children, passing a FDR correction threshold of 0.10.

^b Significantly higher CCEE search rate compared to households searching for care for multiracial children, passing a FDR correction threshold of 0.10.

What Were the Main Reasons Parents Searched for CCEE in 2019?

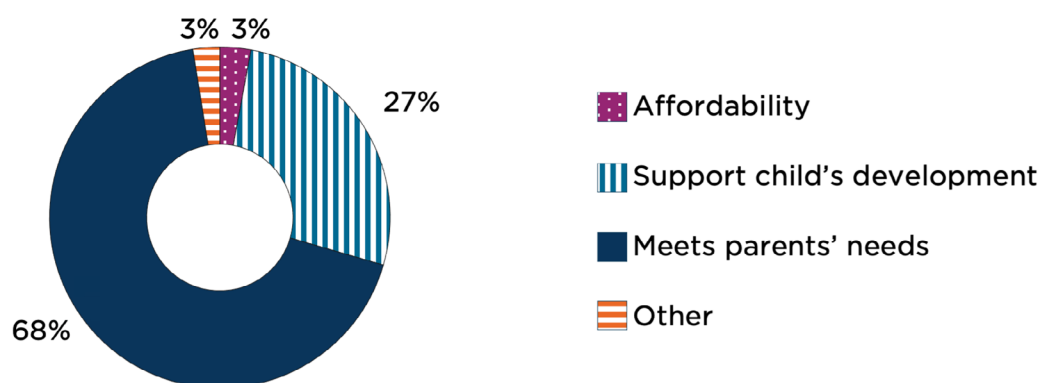
The 2019 NSECE asked household respondents, usually parents, to identify the main reason they searched for CCEE in the past 24 months. As detailed further in Appendix A, Table A1, we categorized responses in accordance with the dimensions identified in the Access Guidebook (Friese et al., 2017). The resulting categories included reasons for CCEE search related to *affordability*, *supporting child's development*, *meeting parents' needs*, and *other*.

Categorizing the reasons for CCEE search into the dimensions of CCEE access enables an examination of which dimensions most heavily factored into a CCEE decision for parents at a singular point in time.

Importantly, no one dimension is a more preferred or valuable reason for engaging in a CCEE search than any other; comparisons are examined to better understand the reasons why parents seek CCEE and how supports and services might be better tailored to meet their needs.

- Across all examined age groups and income levels, parents most commonly identified reasons for CCEE search related to *meeting parents' needs*, followed by *supporting child's development* (see Figure 3). These were also the two most common reasons cited in a 2012 NSECE analysis of CCEE search patterns (Hill et al., 2021).
- When compared to parents that searched for CCEE for a preschool-aged child, parents that searched for CCEE for an infant or toddler cited *supporting child's development* at a lower rate, and *meeting parents' needs* at a higher rate (see Figure 4).
- Across all households searching for CCEE, those with higher incomes selected a reason related to *meeting parents' needs* at a lower rate when compared to those with lower incomes. Households with higher incomes ($\geq 200\%$ FPL) searched for CCEE at a significantly higher rate than households with lower incomes ($< 200\%$ FPL). This trend was not significant among households searching for infant and toddler CCEE.
- When looking at trends by child race and ethnicity,⁹ most households identified *meeting parent's needs* as their main reason for care, followed by *supporting child's development*. This order was reversed for households that searched for CCEE for a NH Asian or Asian American child. NH Asian or Asian American households cited reasons related to *supporting child's development* at a significantly higher rate compared to households in which the child was NH White, NH Black or African American, NH multiracial, or Hispanic or Latino (Figure 5).

Figure 3. Main reason households reported searching for CCEE, categorized into the Access Guidebook dimensions

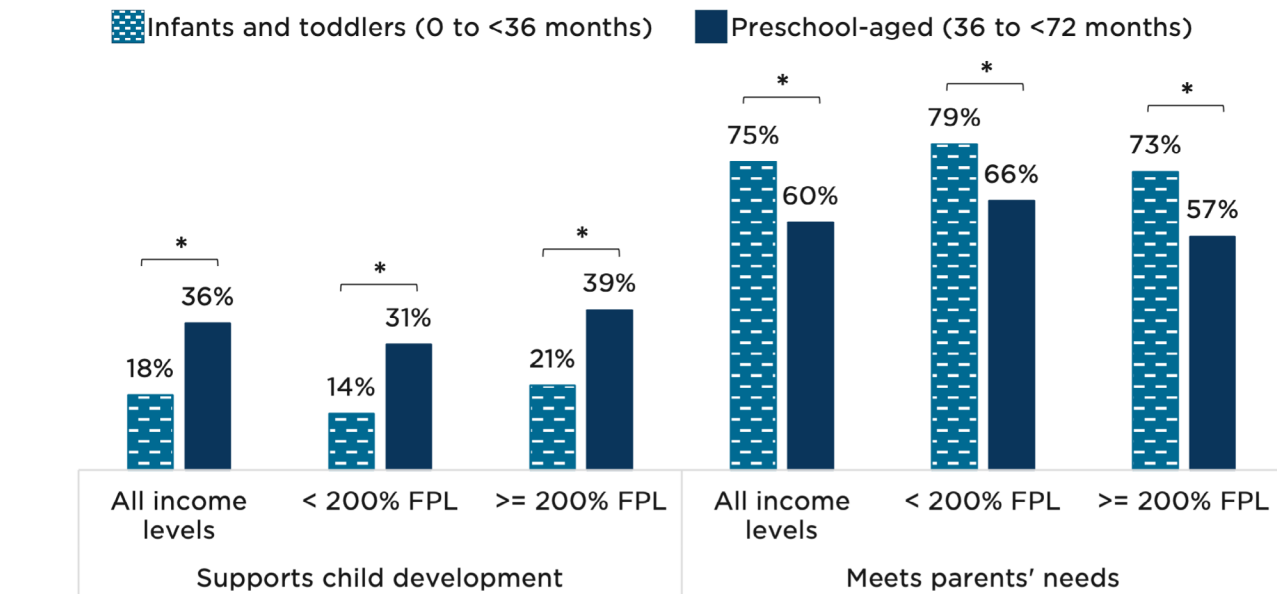


Source: Analysis of the 2019 NSECE HH Survey by Child Trends.

Note: Sample includes households that reported on children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, and recently searched for CCEE, excluding cases in which the reason for search was missing. *Other* reasons include responses such as, “wanted to give provider relief” or, “child wanted to go to program.” See Appendix A, Table A1 for a full listing of responses coded into each dimension.

⁹ The sample sizes for households in which the child was NH Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, NH American Indian or Alaska Native, or NH another racial category not collected were suppressed due to reliability concerns.

Figure 4. Main reasons households reported searching for CCEE, by household income and age of child

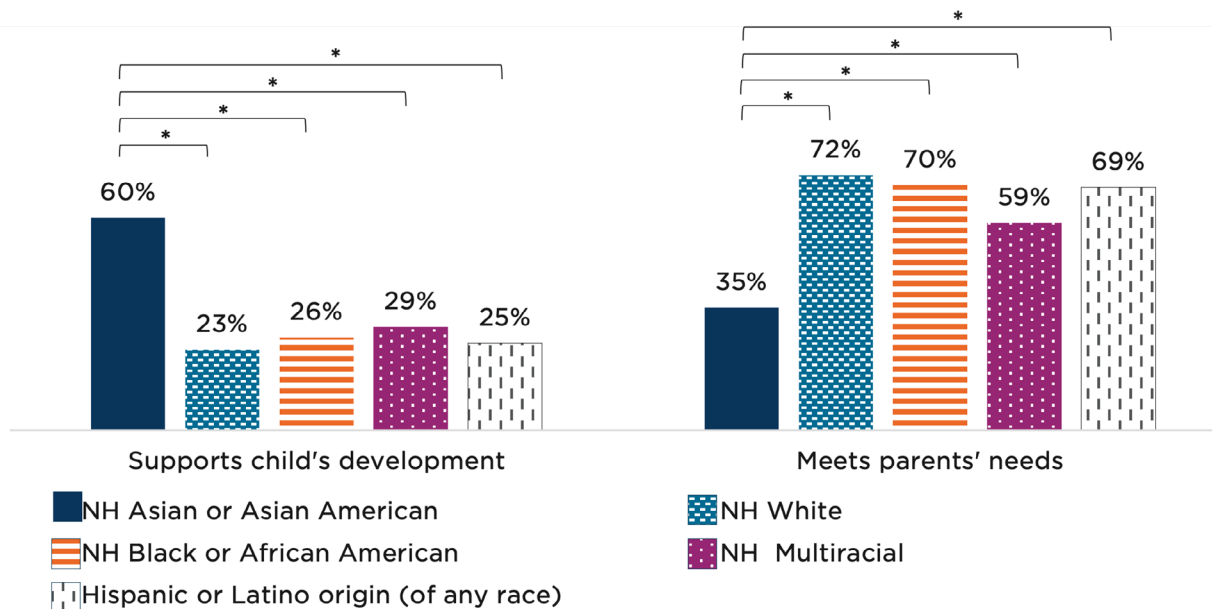


Source: Analysis of the 2019 NSECE HH Survey by Child Trends.

Note: Sample includes households that reported on children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, and recently searched for CCEE, excluding cases in which reason for search was missing.

* Significant group differences passing a FDR correction threshold of 0.10.

Figure 5. Main reasons households reported searching for CCEE, by race and ethnicity of child



Source: Analysis of the 2019 NSECE HH Survey by Child Trends.

Note: Sample includes households that reported on children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, and recently searched for CCEE, excluding cases in which either the reason for search or the child's race and ethnicity was missing. Estimates from NH Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, NH American Indian or Alaska Native, and NH another racial category not collected were suppressed due to reliability concerns. NH = Not Hispanic or Latino

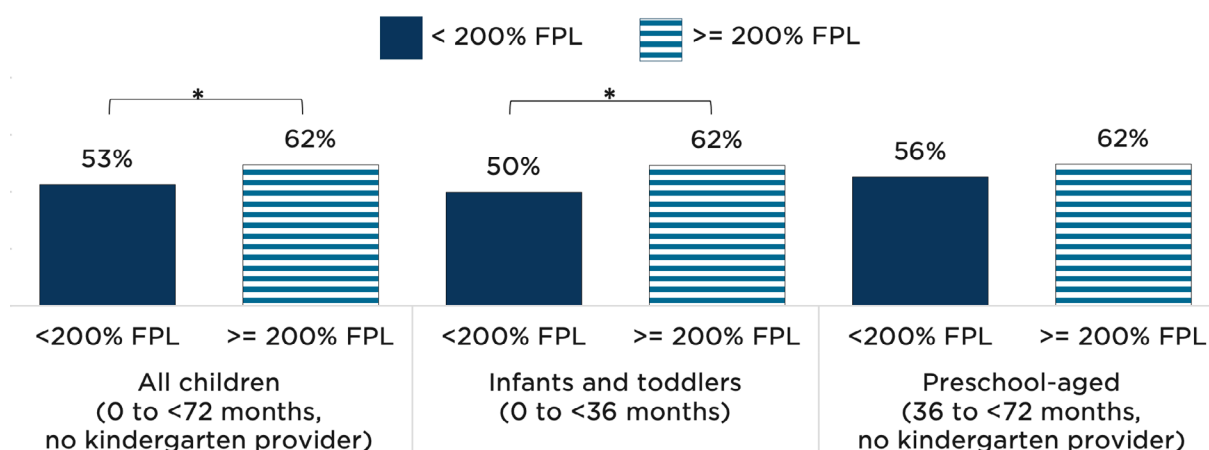
* Significant group differences passing a FDR correction threshold of 0.10.

How Many Searches for CCEE Resulted in a Change of Care?

Parents that searched for CCEE reported whether they (1) changed their care (i.e., shifted from parental care to non-parental CCEE or changed previous non-parental CCEE providers) or (2) did not change their care (e.g., decided not to use CCEE other than parents, stayed with an existing CCEE provider, were still searching, or gave up their search for another reason).

- Just over half of parents that searched for CCEE for a young child (59%) reported a change in care.
- As shown in Figure 6, the rate at which households reported a change of care was significantly higher among households with higher incomes compared to those with lower incomes. This trend also existed in 2012 NSECE analyses of CCEE search patterns (Hill et al., 2021).
- This difference in the change of care rate by household income remained when examining only households that searched for CCEE for an infant or toddler; however, there were no income-based differences among households that searched for CCEE for a preschool-aged child.
- There were no significant differences in change of care when examining rates by child race and ethnicity¹⁰ (see Figure 7).

Figure 6. Percent of households whose search for CCEE resulted in a change of care, by age of child and household income



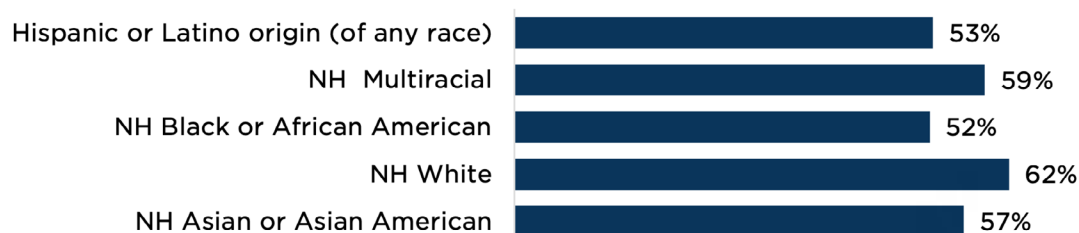
Source: Analysis of the 2019 NSECE HH Survey by Child Trends.

Note: Sample includes households that reported on children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, and recently searched for CCEE. FPL = federal poverty level.

* Significant group differences passing a FDR correction threshold of 0.10.

¹⁰ The sample sizes for households in which the child was NH Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, NH American Indian or Alaska Native, or NH another racial category not collected were suppressed due to reliability concerns.

Figure 7. Percent of households whose search for CCEE resulted in a change of care, by race and ethnicity of child



Source: Analysis of the 2019 NSECE HH Survey by Child Trends.

Note: Sample includes households that reported on children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, and recently searched for CCEE, excluding cases in which either the reason for search or the child's race and ethnicity was missing. Estimates from NH Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, NH American Indian or Alaska Native, and NH another racial category not collected were suppressed due to reliability concerns. There were no significant group differences passing a FDR correction threshold of 0.10. NH = Not Hispanic or Latino.

What Were Parents' Main Reasons for Not Changing Care After a CCEE Search?

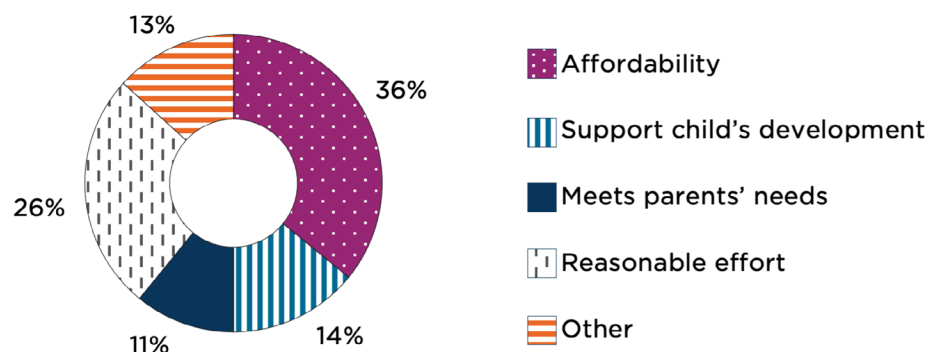
In many cases, parents chose not to change their child's care after engaging in a CCEE search. Household respondents reported the main reasons they did not change care after their CCEE search, and we again categorized these reasons in accordance with the dimensions in the Access definition (see Appendix A, Table A2 for categorizations). Categories included reasons for not changing care related to *affordability*, *supporting child's development*, *meeting parents' needs*, *reasonable effort*, and *other*.

The reasons parents make CCEE decisions are likely multifaceted, and the categorized reasons do not capture the full complexity. However, categorizing the main reasons for CCEE search decisions into the dimensions of CCEE access can help identify which aspects of access most commonly contribute to a search resulting in no change of care. Comparisons are offered to examine how parents may be better supported in making their CCEE search decisions.

- Across all examined age groups and income levels, the most common reasons households reported not changing care at the end of their CCEE search were related to *affordability*, followed by *reasonable effort* (see Figure 8).
- There were no significant differences in the rates at which respondents cited a particular reason for not changing care by household income, child age, or child race and ethnicity.¹¹

¹¹ We did not conduct comparisons tests on samples that were suppressed (i.e., NH Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, NH American Indian or Alaska Native, or NH another racial category not collected) or flagged for cautious interpretation (NH Asian or Asian American and NH multiracial).

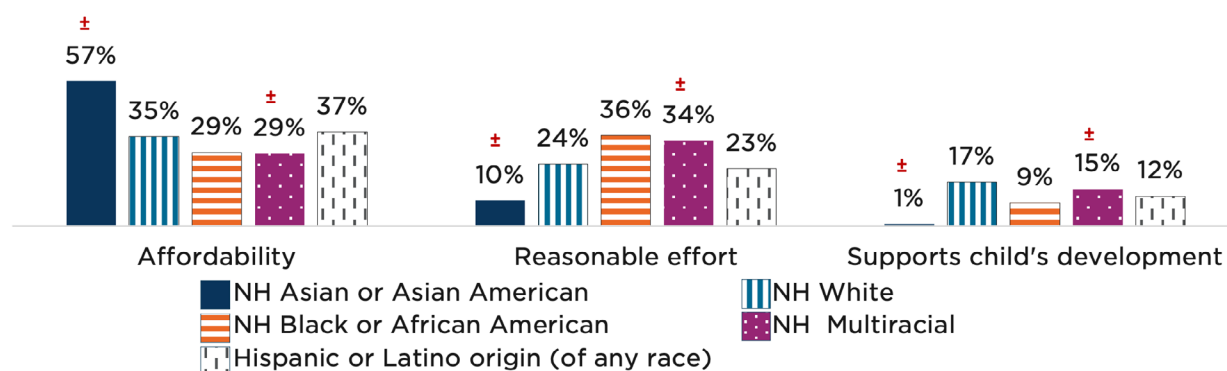
Figure 8. Households' main reason for not changing care, categorized into the Access definition dimensions



Source: Analysis of the 2019 NSECE HH Survey by Child Trends.

Note: Sample includes households that reported on children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, and did not change their provider as a result of their recent CCEE search, excluding cases in which the reason for the search decision was missing. Other reasons include responses such as, "best feeling" or, "child choice." See Appendix A, Table A2 for a full listing of responses coded into each dimension.

Figure 9. Households' main reason for not changing care, by child race and ethnicity



Source: Analysis of the 2019 NSECE HH Survey by Child Trends.

Note: Sample includes households that reported on children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, and did not change their provider as a result of their recent CCEE search, excluding cases in which either the reason for the CCEE search decision or child's race and ethnicity was missing. Estimates from NH Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, NH American Indian or Alaska Native, and NH another racial category not collected were suppressed due to reliability concerns. There were no significant group differences passing a FDR correction threshold of 0.10. NH = Not Hispanic or Latino.

[±] = Interpret with caution due to small sample; sample not included in comparison testing.

Conclusion

In 2019, just over one-third of households that reported information on a child under age 6 had engaged in a recent CCEE search. Most parents cited search reasons related to the Access Guidebook dimensions of *meeting parents' needs* and *supporting child's development*. Most parents that engaged in searches ultimately enrolled with a new provider after their search; among those that did not, the most common reasons for not changing providers were related to *affordability or reasonable effort*. There were no significant differences among the reasons for *not* changing care among parents searching for care.

Findings suggest that, while parents may share some commonalities in their CCEE search and decision-making patterns, there are differences by household income and the age, race, and ethnicity of the child. While these findings provide an initial exploration, there are some limitations. First, the reasons parents search for CCEE and ultimately make CCEE decisions are likely intricate and do not exist solely within a single dimension of CCEE access. Further, we do not have additional context about what led parents to select any one reason for CCEE search and decision making, or whether those factors are ultimately related to the examined characteristics of child age, household income, and child race and ethnicity. Furthermore, unexamined factors, like employment, geographic supply of CCEE, and family composition can have considerable influence on CCEE decision-making. Our findings suggest families have different needs in their CCEE search process, and although we do not necessarily know why these differences exist, we can use that information to better support them in their search for CCEE that best meets their needs. Future research should engage with parents directly via interviews or focus groups to better understand the unique household contexts and localized factors (e.g., community supply) that contribute to CCEE decision-making.

Appendix A: Using the Access Guidebook to Categorize Parents' Main Reason for CCEE Search and Decision-Making

The 2019 NSECE HH Survey asked household respondents who recently searched for CCEE, “What is the main reason that you were looking for child care at that time?” After respondents reported the result of their CCEE search, they were asked, “What was the main reason you made that decision?”

In a complementary 2012 NSECE HH Survey analysis (Hill et al., 2021), a team of Child Trends researchers and Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) staff used a consensus-based process to assign parents' reasons for searching for CCEE and reasons for CCEE search decisions into the four dimensions of the Access Guidebook (Friese et al., 2019). They assigned “Other” as a fifth category for responses that did not fit into the four dimensions and classified responses of, “Don't Know/Refused” as missing responses to exclude from estimates. We applied the same categorization to 2019 NSECE HH Survey responses.

Table A1 lists the access dimensions and the reported reasons for CCEE search that we categorized into each dimension. Similarly, Table A2 lists the reasons respondents reported not changing their care, categorized within each access dimension. Categorizing survey responses can be subjective, and future researchers might ultimately identify different categorizations of survey responses for their analysis.

Table A1. Parent's main reasons for searching for CCEE assigned to Access Guidebook dimensions.

Access Dimension	Main reason parent was looking for CCEE at recorded time
Affordability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wanted to reduce child care expenses
Reasonable effort	[No responses were assigned to the reasonable effort dimension]
Support child's development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To provide my child educational or social enrichment • Child no longer eligible for previous care (e.g., aged out or summer break) • A specific extra-curricular activity (e.g., violin lessons, skiing lessons)* • Child needed a special kind of help (e.g., speech therapy, special needs, disabled, bilingual, etc.)*
Meet parents' needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • So that I could work/change in work schedule • To give me some relief • To fill in gaps left by my main provider or before/after school • Wasn't satisfied with care • Provider stopped providing care • So that respondent or respondent's spouse could go to school/school schedule changed • Family moved to new area* • Change in family/household composition (e.g., death, divorce, pregnancy, new baby, etc.)* • Needed a provider who was closer to home or work* • Care during a temporary commitment by parent(s)/respondent* • Needed care that could provide transportation to/from school*

Access Dimension	Main reason parent was looking for CCEE at recorded time
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other • Health problems created need for care arrangement* • Wanted to give Provider relief* • Child WANTED to go to program* • To learn what arrangements were available/learn about other options in case I needed one* • Specific reason not given

Notes: 2019 NSECE field interviewers coded open-ended responses into an existing code frame; any reasons that fell outside of the code frame were coded as “Other”. The “Other” category was then back-coded and common themes were reclassified as an additional response category (identified with an asterisk, *).

Table A2. Parents’ main reason for not enrolling with a new provider assigned to Access Guidebook dimensions.

Access Dimension	Main reason parent made child CCEE search decision
Affordability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost
Reasonable effort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Had no other choices • Location • Provider had space available • Still looking* • Provider had no spots available* • Convenience/flexibility* • Waiting to hear back from program/not started yet* • Did not qualify*
Support child’s development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of care • Like program content curriculum/activities* • Concerns with program quality (e.g., safety, crowding, number of adults, etc.)* • Program ability to care for children with special needs* • To interact with other children*
Meet parents’ needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule • Household circumstances changed* • Did not find work, no job* • Transportation (or lack thereof)* • Met all my needs* • Moving/moved

Access Dimension	Main reason parent made child CCEE search decision
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Best feeling • Other • Had prior relationship with provider* • Decided to take care of child myself (or spouse decided to) * • Child choice (wanted or did not want)* • Did not change providers* • Medical/health* • Uncomfortable with strangers watching my child*

Note: Respondents were provided a list of reasons (i.e., had no other choices; cost; schedule; location; quality of care; best feeling; provider had space available; and other) when asked about their reason for their CCEE decision. After survey administration, the NSECE Project Team back coded “other” responses into the main code frame or added additional themes (identified with an asterisk, *) that were frequent or relevant enough to justify addition.

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